



# Oregon

Kate Brown, Governor

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**DATE:** February 6, 2019

**TO:** House Human Services and Housing Committee

**FROM:** Marilyn Jones, Child Welfare Director, Department of Human Services

**SUBJECT:** HB 2033 Testimony

## **INTRODUCTION**

Today I am excited to talk about House Bill 2033 that addresses diversifying our Child Welfare Workforce. This bill was brought to your committee from Governor Brown on behalf of the Department of Human Services.

### ***Background***

Let me introduce you to Ashley.

Ashley is a superstar who has a passion for child welfare and the desire to help the children in her community. I watched her take on every job she was given and excel, she had a wealth of lived experience but did not have a four-year degree and without that degree she could not advance into her dream job as a case worker. But that wasn't going to stop her. While working full time she registered for college and started working on her degree. I did mention that she was amazing, correct? This young woman worked fulltime, is a single mom and was able to complete two years towards her bachelor's degree. This past year District 13 had two failed recruitments and was given permission to post a underfill position which allows someone who is within two years of completing their degree to apply to become a caseworker. Ashley applied, interviewed and received a job offer, she was thrilled.

But let me tell you the impact of what this means. This single mom receives less pay because it is an underfilled position. She must attend all required trainings, work full time, take care of her little one and finish her degree within two years or she cannot continue in this position.

This story is only one reflection of why we need to address a change in the educational requirements for our caseworkers.

While meeting with African American Leadership in the Portland area two weeks ago, this is what they told us...

- Lack of diversity and specifically equitable representation of African-Americans in the department at all levels result in their inability to succeed.
- This underrepresentation has created a barrier for the department to build a relationship where their community recognizes the department as a resource and source of support for its families.
- This underrepresentation has created a workforce that doesn't reflect their community. Educational restrictions are one indicator of this dilemma. As a result, we have workers who are not culturally responsive to their families making decisions that have adverse long-term implications.

We need to do something about this and we need your help.

As you know, over the past year, Child Welfare has been working hard to move the dial on how we are best serving Oregon's children. This has encompassed both large and small initiatives to focus on a multitude of efforts around change while supporting our dedicated workforce.

One of the areas that we have struggled with has been around recruitment and retention of our child welfare staff throughout the state. We are not here today because we are desperate in our hiring, rather we want to honor life experience and continue to build a diverse workforce that is inclusive across language, race, class and culture.

### ***What This Bill Does***

While our numbers are showing a slow and steady positive shift in both recruitment and retention, we continue to assess improvements to other system changes. House Bill 2033 is an opportunity that can continue to make a significant difference. Child Welfare leadership is joined in support of this endorsement by a year-long statewide community engagement effort. These committee members included foster parents, community stakeholders, former foster youth, and nonprofit leaders which also endorses the removal of the educational requirements currently in statute.

### **SUMMARY**

Once again, while meeting with the African American Leadership in the Portland area, we were reminded of our ineffectiveness of relating with our communities. This subsequently contributes to the under-representation in our child welfare workforce.

Our commitment through the support of this legislation is to honor lived experience as a valuable attribute in the service qualities that positively impact our children and families. The rural and urban divide is an element which includes a culture of poverty in rural areas where a four-year degree is a privilege. This contributes to the inability to hire current workforce employees who do not have the means to earn a degree.

As a result, Case Workers and more importantly, Child Protective Services Workers, who assess the safety of children, do not always have the cultural understanding to accurately determine risk without more diversity in our workforce. This then can contribute to a lack of fully understanding culturally specific protective factors when making removal or reunification decisions.

Child welfare caseworkers are one of the few professions that have their educational requirements defined in statute. While this was an intention to ensure quality staff, it may also have restricted our ability to hire quality individuals who may have entered this line of work on a different path. Let me give you another story that exemplifies this and introduce Kevin.

Kevin began working for the agency in 2014 and is currently a Social Service Assistant (SSA).

Kevin was born in Boston, raised poor and lived in an area of mostly African American, Latino and Caribbean populations. Although he did attend some college, he left early to take care of his mother and family after his mother had surgery.

Today, Kevin is still taking care of his family on an SSA salary and is pursuing his college degree by “paying as he goes”.

Kevin has a diverse background with many years of social work experience that includes working in juvenile corrections for two years in Boston, a teaching assistant in Texas, a high school basketball coach for Portland Public Schools, an in-home parenting coach and as an In-Home Safety and Reunification Services (ISRS) provider for Greater New Hope in Portland. Kevin has a history of working with diverse populations, is active in his community and has connections with the community to support the results the agency is looking for—which starts with rapport.

Kevin was recommended for a rotational opportunity by a caseworker who was going out on maternity leave. As an SSA on this rotation, Kevin received positive feedback from Judge Gilmartin for his excellent rapport building and casework. Leadership and peers in Kevin’s District all sing his praise for his outstanding casework. Kevin supported his peers by mentoring and coaching their development which then allowed them to successfully enter casework, and continue to excel in their positions as caseworkers with his support, leadership and informal training.

Even with the experience provided during the rotation, Kevin has been passed up from being hired as a caseworker on two occasions. After interviewing for a casework position, Kevin received feedback from the supervisor that although he does incredible work and excelled as an interim caseworker, they were unable to hire him because he did not meet the statutorily required educational qualifications.

In rural Oregon, not every child grows up believing they have the privilege or even the need of a four-year education. From my experience as a District Manager in Eastern Oregon, they believe in hard work, dedication to family and community, and to take care of their neighbors. Now let's overlay poverty onto this community and we quickly see the overall impact to a robust workforce with educational limitations.

In order to build a more culturally and linguistically responsive workforce DHS needs the appropriate discretion to value and recruit individuals with lived experience.

As we move toward this goal, what we must do is acknowledge the truth about how generational poverty, systemic oppression, and access to secondary educational opportunities have limited many potential case workers from joining our workforce. What we have come to understand is that many of the individuals who would like to join our workforce, yet do not have secondary education, have more in common with our current employees than differences. What they have in common is a passion, commitment, and desire to serve children and families in their communities. They are from rural and urban areas and have a wealth of life experiences that can lend to our efforts to ensure safety, permanency, well-being for the many children we serve.

The stories that I share with you today are about community, from mentors, to coaches, and residential staff members caring for our most vulnerable kids in care. These individuals would like an honest and fair opportunity to join us in our efforts to achieve our stated goals. We want to embrace community, honor their voice and provide the best possible chance at success in our move toward excellence.